

Susan E. Smead and Marc C. Wagner

Evolution of the Ice Cream Stand

Ice cream stands developed as a particular building type as the American public's enthusiasm for travel by car grew in the middle decades of the 20th century. One of the nation's favorite foods, ice cream was readily adaptable to "fast food" service, which became increasingly favored by the average consumer during the last century. Carl's Frozen Custard, an ice cream stand built in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1953, and recently placed on the Virginia Landmarks Register, is a classic mid-20th-century example of this unique building type. Ice cream stands such as Carl's reflect distinctly American historical developments and architectural innovations. The ready accessibility of ice cream and the fashion for enjoying it on the road, "fast food" style, evolved in America because of technological innovations in ice cream production, changes in social structure and habits, and the automobile's impact on life in America.

Ice Cream in the United States

Ice cream was introduced in America in the 18th century, during the late colonial period. While frozen desserts first appeared as ices made from fruit juice or sometimes wine, ice cream relying on eggs and cream as essential ingredients

Carl's Frozen Custard, Fredericksburg, Virginia.



was soon developed. Ice cream became fashionable as a delicacy enjoyed by the wealthy as the ice required to make the dessert was generally not available and the process of making the dish was quite laborious. During the late 18th century, George Washington was among the elite who enjoyed ice cream, spending about \$200 on it during the summer of 1790. Thomas Jefferson developed a fondness for ice cream while serving as Minister to France in 1785-1789, and brought recipes back with him to Monticello. While president, Jefferson served the dessert at White House dinners, a practice continued by Dolly Madison during her years as first lady. In 1846, the hand-cranked ice cream maker was invented by Nancy Johnson thereby making the frozen treat more accessible to the middle classes. The ice cream manufacturing industry began in the United States in 1851.

Until the mid-19th century, restaurants were relatively rare in the United States. Before this time, travelers could find a meal at a tavern or ordinary, and many hotel and boarding house dining rooms catered to both guests and the public. Other than the patrons of coffee houses and oyster houses, which were popular gathering places and eateries during this period, few Americans dined out purely for enjoyment. As America became more industrialized and the country's urban centers grew, businesses offering light fare and quick service gained in appeal. Soda fountains appeared in the 19th century following the development of the beverage in 1839. With the nationwide advent of Prohibition in 1919, soda fountains grew increasingly popular, dispensing soft drinks as an alternative to alcohol. Coincidentally, just after the turn of the century, soda fountain design began to emulate the typical saloon prototype, with a counter fronted by stools standing before a high-back bar area that often featured an oversized mirror on the wall above. To augment soda-based concoctions, many soda fountains began to offer light meals to their customers in the late 19th century.

Ice Cream Meets Roadside

In the 1930s and 1940s, as automobile travel rose in popularity and road touring became a recreational pursuit, eateries appeared with increasing frequency along American highways. The forms that these establishments took ranged from the distinctive, modern diner to the idiosyncratic, hand-built roadside stand which often lacked any aesthetic pretensions. Ice cream,

perennially popular and long available at recreational establishments such as amusement parks and resorts, was a logical choice for roadside sale. The ice cream cone, developed in the late 1890s and patented in 1903, allowed the “take away” sale of ice cream and thereby added to the marketability of the product.

An alternative to conventional ice cream, “soft serve” ice cream was invented in the 1930s and became the foundation of the Dairy Queen® chain of ice cream stands. The Tastee-Freeze® chain emerged in the late 1940s and also offered the soft form of ice cream. Many small regional operations and independently owned stands followed suit, selling the new and novel “soft serve” or “frozen custard” ice cream. Various recipes for these ice creams were developed, but essentially soft ice cream is the consistency of the dessert taken directly from the freezer before hardening, while frozen custard is created by adding eggs to soft ice cream and cooking the mixture to a custard state before it is frozen.

Structures adapted for use as roadside ice cream stands varied from simple, one-of-a-kind buildings that housed “mom and pop” operations to fairly sophisticated designs that frequently became emblematic of specific commercial chains. However, by the mid-20th century there were common characteristics found in the typical ice cream stand and its setting, which included proximity to the road for ready visibility and accessibility for passing motorists, ample parking immediately adjacent to and usually in front of the building, prominently placed service windows, and large expanses of plate glass in the facade and the front portions of the side walls. Many, including Dairy Queen® stands, had flat-topped roofs surmounted with prominent and eye-catching signage, often employing bright fluorescent and neon lights. Some of the roadside ice cream stands took on more dramatic lines with façades that featured forward-leaning walls. Independent ice cream stands occasionally sported decorative, futuristic-looking elements, such as side fins or other architectural elaborations, and sometimes employed large-scale figurative signage, often depicting a giant ice cream cone. Two smaller chains designed their prototypical stands in emblematic forms, employing programmatic architecture to catch the customer’s eye. Mowrer’s Ice Cream Company of Pennsylvania used stands that looked like giant Lily Tulip cups, a typical ice cream container of

the 1930s, while the Parker Ice Cream Company of West Virginia operated Big Cone stands designed to appear as giant inverted ice cream cones.

Through the 20th century, the attraction of the ice cream stand reached its peak and then declined somewhat, as other fast-food restaurants serving a variety of quick meals came into vogue. Also, the number of chain operations with standardized building designs increased in relation to the percentage of individually-run, uniquely-designed ice cream stands. These buildings, which often borrowed motifs from chain ice cream stands, are architecturally quite fragile and are frequently threatened by commercial competition, by highways superseding secondary roads as favored transportation routes, by insensitive modernization, and by neglect. Those that stand close to communities on well-traveled roads generally have fared better.

Carl’s Frozen Custard Stand

Carl’s is an especially good example of a family-run, independent ice cream stand that possesses architectural character and has retained its design integrity. The recent listing of Carl’s on the Virginia Landmarks Register makes it the first ice cream stand to attain such notable recognition in Virginia.

The historic context for ice cream stands in Virginia follows the national example with few exceptions. Although there is no exhaustive survey of ice cream stands in Virginia, Carl’s appears to be an excellent representative of ice cream stands that were once moderately common along the Virginia roadside during the 1940s and 1950s.

Virginia’s historic ice cream-related establishments survive in very modest numbers. During the 1930s and 1940s, ice cream sales were often tied closely to the local major dairy processing plant. The growth of dairy operations around the major urban nodes in Virginia also follows the same model as the national example. The largest processing plants were situated in the more sizable towns and cities. In the 1940s, some of the major dairy plants opened restaurants that featured their own line of freshly made ice cream. Often these restaurants were literally attached, or adjacent, to the dairy processing plants. In Front Royal, the National Register-eligible Royal Dairy, opened in the late 1940s, still operates as a restaurant, despite the closing of the dairy plant operations. A fine neon-lit Moderne style build-

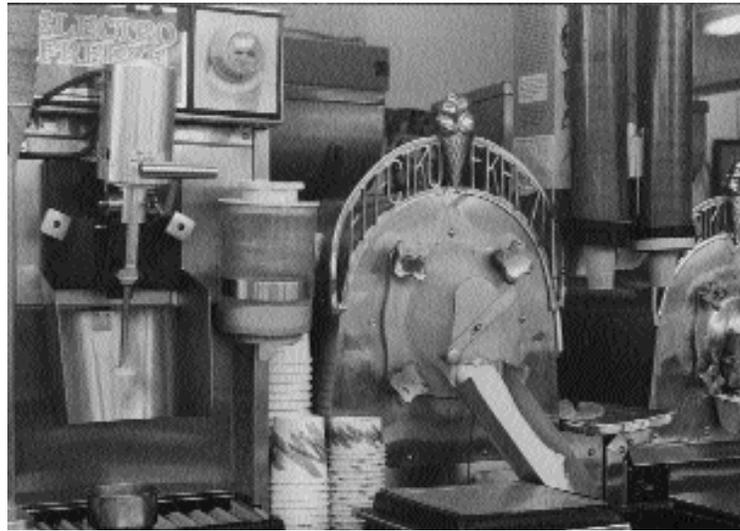
Electro Free® machines dating to the 1940s.

ing with exterior clad in tan colored tile, Royal Dairy retains a high degree of integrity. Especially notable is the original circular plan center counter that dominates the interior space with lime green enamel partitions. In Richmond, the Curles Neck Dairy opened a similar facility which has been remodeled since the 1940s. While a primary outlet for plant-produced ice cream, these were eaten in restaurants that served a full menu of food.

Popular American ice cream stores appeared across the state in the 1940s with increasingly greater numbers in the 1950s. Today, Dairy Queen,® Baskin-Robbins,® and a handfull of Tastee Freeze® stores dot the Virginia landscape. Before ice cream was available in supermarkets, ice cream stands and downtown ice cream parlors were the best outlets for frozen ice cream or custard treats.

Given the narrowing market for ice cream stands in the late 20th century, the survival of Carl's is rather unusual. Primarily significant for its highly intact and noteworthy design, Carl's gained status in the market place for its consistently high quality product. The decision to maintain the structure's historic appearance was primarily due to the owner and his family's hands-on role in developing the original design and the superb signage. As a result, they felt strongly about maintaining the historic appearance of their business.

Carl Sponseller, the original owner, left the family's Oxford, Pennsylvania, truck farm in 1935 and eventually settled in Washington, DC. While working for Beck's Frozen Custard, Sponseller noticed that a considerable portion of the clientele came from Virginia. By April 1947, Carl and Margaret Sponseller had relocated to Fredericksburg and opened their own frozen custard store in a former gas station. The choice of Fredericksburg was a deliberate and important business strategy. Princess Anne Street, one of the main avenues through the downtown, was also U.S. Route 1, and as such, was perhaps the busiest north-south travel route in the eastern United States at the time (predating the country's Interstate system). The street was a natural corridor for diners, gas stations, and overnight accommodations.



A local contractor constructed a relatively simple building to house Carl's ice cream business. The design was based on a similar structure that the Sponseller's brothers had built in Falls Church. Constructed of concrete block with a stucco finish, the one-story building has a flat roof and a projecting overhang at the front. While the rear of the building is unadorned, the façade is moderately sophisticated. The overhanging roof is actually wider at the front than at the rear. The service area consists of a projecting wide band of windows with walk-up counter at center. The counter is skirted with green plastic laminate panels. The area above the walk-up is surmounted by large free-standing letters that spell out "Thick Shakes-Quarts-Pints- Shakes-Sundaes-Milk Shakes." The underside of the overhang has a slight cove transitioning between the vertical and horizontal surfaces. Florescent tube lights surround the outer edge of the soffit. When lit, the effect on the bright white paint and the smooth stucco, back lighting the free standing stylized script letters, is an added enhancement to the distinct roof signage. The roof design was developed by Carl Sponseller. Carl's roof-mounted sign is V-shaped in plan and features a forward tilted ice cream cone and two panels. Two neon lit roof signs read "Carl's" in free standing letters with a smaller line underneath proclaiming "Creme-Shakes-Sundaes."

If the design seems familiar, it's because it was probably adapted from Dairy Queen's® prototype design. Dairy Queen® used the forwarded tilted cone, free standing letters under the overhang, and exhibited a flat roof profile. A Dairy Queen® stand had opened on Princess Anne Street in 1950, and this may have been one of the

*Photos by
Sabrina Carlson,
1999.*

direct influences on the eventual design for Carl's. Sponseller clearly modified the basic, simple and flatter concept by deepening the architectural dimensions and adding more elaborate signage. In the 1960s, most Dairy Queen® operations converted to the red-roofed gambrel barn design and away from the "modern" look in an effort to relate their buildings to a traditional rural architectural form, a reminder of the dairy barn origins of their product. Carl's harkens back to the aspirations of non-referential modernism, a design that was meant to be new, clean, and inviting.

The interior of Carl's is functional and little altered. It consists of the front service area, a work area at the rear, and a small office. One of the more unusual features, and believed to be a reason for the quality of Carl's frozen custard, are the two 1940s Electro Freeze® machines that feature wonderful freestanding "Electro Freeze®" lettered crowns with central motifs depicting a small cone and scoops.

Several important issues required resolution in the professional evaluation of this resource. Because of the relatively recent construction date of the building (only 48 years old) and the scarcity of comparative research on ice cream stands and the ice cream industry, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources undertook additional investigations with regard to the rarity and integrity of Carl's Frozen Custard Stand.

The Virginia Department of Historic Resources was able to successfully assess the significance of Carl's based upon both the general rarity of historic ice cream stands in Virginia and the unusual architectural integrity of this particular structure. The fact that Carl's is still seasonally operated and uses some of its original frozen custard-making equipment underlines its uniqueness and importance. It was fortuitous that two recent publications offer new insights on restaurants and roadside establishments. Philip Langdon's *Orange Roofs, Golden Arches: The Architecture of American Chain Restaurants* (1986) contains superb information on roadside design and corporate history. Likewise, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age*, written by John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, is a definitive source for understanding the ice cream industry and the roadside stand. These publications are useful resources for evaluating the potential significance of ice cream stands and placing them in a comparative context. Additional site-specific information may be

gleaned from local records and local oral histories. Since many of these structures date to the late 1940s and early 1950s, original owners and/or their extended families are sometimes still available.

Carl's is still operated by members of the Sponseller family. As is traditional with most ice cream stands, Carl's operates during the warm months of the year from spring to early fall. Carl's continues to draw a faithful clientele and new customers alike supporting a thriving business while surviving as a rare and fine example of the mid-20th century ice cream stand.

References

- David, Elizabeth. *Harvest of the Cold Months: The Social History of Ice and Ices*. London: Michael Joseph, 1994.
- Heimann, Jim. *Car Hops and Curb Service: A History of American Drive-In Restaurants, 1920-1960*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996.
- Ice Cream. *Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia*, 2000. Internet site: <http://encarta.msn.com>.
- Stradley, Linda. *History and Legends of Ices, Ice Cream*. Internet site: <http://www.geocities.com/NapaValley/4079/History/IceCreamHistory.htm>.
- Stradley, Linda. *History of the Ice Cream Cone*. Internet site: <http://www.geocities.com/NapaValley/4079/History/IceCreamCone.htm>.
- Jakle, John A. and Keith A. Sculle. *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Jennings, Jan, ed. *Roadside America: The Automobile in Design and Culture*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1990.
- Langdon, Philip. *Orange Roofs, Golden Arches: The Architecture of American Chain Restaurants*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986.

Susan E. Smead is an architectural historian and Preservation Program Coordinator, Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

Marc C. Wagner is an architectural historian and National Register Manager, Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

Acknowledgments

Thanks go to Keith A. Sculle and John A. Jakle for their ground-breaking scholarship in the study of roadside commercial architecture. We are also indebted to Paul N. Sponseller, Trustee, owner of Carl's in Fredericksburg, VA, and Sabrina Carlson, who prepared the National Register of Historic Places nomination for Carl's.